Information Brief

Risk-Focused Prevention

In any school, there will be one or more groups of students who are more at risk for engaging in problem behavior than are others. Often these students live in circumstances and have personal characteristics that put them at risk for the development of problem behaviors. At the same time, there are also protective factors that diminish the effects of exposure to risk factors and enhance protective factors, thus reducing the incidence of problem behaviors. Current research (Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1999) has shown that some preventive intervention strategies can have a positive impact on these factors and subsequently the resulting problem behaviors. Schools that are developing a continuum of programs and services designed to prevent violent and disruptive behavior and to promote healthy social, emotional, and behavioral development need to adopt strategies that will be effective in achieving these results.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:
- *The school, in collaboration with the community, provides a full and accessible array of specialized programs and services to address the needs of students experiencing social, emotional and/or behavioral problems.*
- *Schools and community agencies and organizations establish working partnerships to support students and their families.*

INTRODUCTION:

> **"Recent research suggests that between 9 million and 16 million children in the nation are growing up with disadvantages that 'limit the development of their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self, and generally restrict their chances for successful lives.'"**
>
> *- Thomas McClellan,*
> *National Governors' Association*

We should view all young people as positive resources to our communities. To prevent the tragic loss of such capital, schools must partner with parents and the community to help young people become healthy, productive adults. Risk-focused prevention programs that address both risk and protective factors are essential components of the continuum of programs and services that foster the healthy social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development of their students. The work in risk-focused prevention begins with the belief that all students are important and that investing in all is an important part of the work of schools, well worth the time and effort expended.

WHAT IS RISK-FOCUSED PREVENTION?
Risk-focused prevention consists of the programs and strategies used to work with individual students or groups of students who have conditions present in their lives that place them at risk for developing certain problem behaviors such as substance abuse, aggression, violence, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school. At the same time, studies have shown that there is a set of protective factors that mediate the effect of the exposure of young people to risk, resulting in reduced incidence of problem behavior.

Current research suggests that both these sets of factors are promising targets for preventive interventions. Interventions that enhance resilience by promoting protective factors and reducing risk, either singly, or more powerfully in combination, can reduce the likelihood that problem behaviors will develop and increase the likelihood that prevention efforts will be effective.

WHO IS AT-RISK?

> **"Youth who do not have opportunities to develop positive attitudes and behaviors and to test them within a supportive environment are at risk of a host of antisocial and negative behaviors."**
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> *NGA Center for Best Practices, July 2000*

To be most effective, prevention efforts must begin early – between birth and six years of age. Although most of the risk factors in the lives of young children are centered in families and communities, schools can play an important role in counteracting them by serving as good community members. This includes fostering the development of protective factors through parent education, serving as community centers for human services, sponsoring early childhood education programs, and sharing expertise by providing cross agency training.

Recent school shootings have focused much attention on the characteristics of the students who did the shootings so that potential shooters can be identified. Although researchers have identified warning signs, no single profile has emerged that would predict which students will become violent. Early warning signs, discussed in detail in the document *Early Warning,*

Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools, can alert school staff to emerging problems that may warrant intervention, but they are not intended to serve as a checklist for singling out students for punishment isolation and stigmatization. Any warning signs should be understood in the larger context of each student's situation (MacClellan, 1999).

> *"If antisocial behavior is not changed by the end of grade three, it should be treated like a chronic condition much like diabetes. That is, it cannot be changed, but managed with appropriate supports and continuing intervention."*
>
> *-Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995*

The Social Development Research Group (SDRG) at the University of Washington has conducted some of the most substantial and recognized research in the area of at-risk children and youth. Researchers identified a set of factors that put young people at risk for adolescent health and behavior problems such as school failure, substance abuse, delinquency, and pregnancy. Environmental conditions in children's homes, schools, and communities, as well as personal physiology and personality traits, also are risk factors.

SDRG also identified protective factors and processes that buffer the effects of a student's exposure to risk and thereby reduce their development of health and behavior problems. They organize both risk and protective factors into five domains: individual, family, peers, school, and the broader community.

What Can Schools Do?
Researchers have identified an array of effective strategies for the reduction of problem behaviors. A school district can implement a selection of these strategies and monitor the occurrence of problem behaviors in order to test the effectiveness of the strategy.

The *Iowa Youth Survey (IYS)*, the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)*, the *Search Institute Survey*, and the *Communities that Care Youth Survey* all yield data that inform schools about the incidence and prevalence of problem behaviors among the students in their districts. These data can be used to prioritize risk and protective factors and guide the selection of effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Hawkins and Catalano (1995) identified three cate-gories of risk factors that are directly related to schools: early and persistent antisocial behavior, lack of commitment to schools, and academic failure beginning in lower elementary schools. They also identified a set of strategies that ameliorate these risk factors.

They are:
- Prenatal/Infancy Programs
- Early Childhood Education
- Parent Training
- Family Therapy
- Classroom Management, Organization and Instructional Strategies
- Classroom Curricula for Social Competence Promotion
- School Behavior Management Strategies
- After School Recreation Programs
- Mentoring with Contingent Reinforcement
- Parent Training
- Organizational Change in Schools
- Youth Employment with Education

What Works?
In order to support schools and communities in their efforts to reduce the prevalence of problem behaviors, a variety of organizations have involved prevention scientists to identify effective strategies and programs. They have made available lists of such programs, typically divided into two categories: proven effective and promising approaches. The former have met the test of rigorous research. The latter, while not having been researched at the most rigorous levels, have some evidence of effectiveness. For more information on these programs and strategies, check the websites identified below. System strategies embodied in most of the listed programs include the following:

Proven Effective Strategies -
- building school capacity to initiate and sustain innovation;
- communicating and clarifying behavioral norms by establishing school rules, improving consistency of rule enforcement using positive reinforcement of appropriate behavior, and conducting school-wide campaigns;
- implementing instructional programs that focus on a range of social skills (i.e., developing self-control, stress-management, social problem solving, communication skills, and responsible decision-making) and are delivered over a long period of time to continually reinforce the skills.

Promising Strategies –
- grouping students into smaller units to create more supportive interactions and greater flexibility in instructional practices, such as schools-within-schools;
- behavior modification programs that teach thinking skills to at risk youth;
- programs that improve classroom management and instructional techniques.

- Hill M. Walker, 2001

Some strategies should be targeted at individual students or small groups of students who are at risk

of developing problem behaviors. These strategies include youth involvement, mentoring, service to others, after school programs that provide safe places, and programs that develop work-related skills and behaviors.

SUMMARY

Any school interested in the success of its students academically, personally, and socially should ensure that effective programs and services are in place especially for students who are at-risk for school failure and the development of problem behaviors. Over the last decade, researchers have contributed greatly to what is known about what works with this population. By using the information about risk-focused prevention strategies, schools can maximize the effectiveness of their efforts, as well as provide opportunities for *all* students to succeed.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:
- **Web sites:**
    - Blueprints for Violence Prevention - http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/Defaults.htm
    - Centers for the Application of Prevention Technology (CAPT) - http://www.captus.org/index.htm
    - Collaboration for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) - http://www.casel.org
    - National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) - *Information@lists.nida.nih.gov*
    - Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools Expert Panel, U.S. Department of Education - http://www.negp.gov/
- **In this Handbook:** See additional briefs, especially *A Continuum of Programs and Services, Frameworks, Youth Development, Youth Involvement, Positive Behavioral Supports, and Early Intervention* in this section. In other sections of the manual, please refer to *Early Warning, Timely Response, Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, *Crisis Management Planning*, and "*Success4's* Critical Elements." For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.